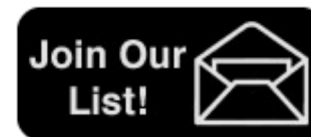




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JULY 5, 2016

Rumification by Hollywood: Whitewash and Backlash

by WAHID AZAL

Everybody became my friend according to their own
consideration; none searched for my secrets from within me

– Rumi, *Masnavi, Book 1: Prologue*

Rumification

In one of the closing chapters of his masterpiece ‘Occidentosis’ (*gharbzadegi*), Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969) famously observed:

[Today] a film studio calls upon a person to portray some
historical or legendary...[figure].. and then spends fantastic

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sums to market these heroes for advertising, embroider their lives, their marriages...divorces...struggles... Beginning a year or two before the film appears, the newspapers, radio, and television report this and the news reaches the ears of the media [everywhere]. Then it comes time to reap the harvest: the film hits the screens in fifteen world capitals with the participation of leading society figures in a single gala opening night. As a result, another hero has been added to the ranks of the heroes of the silver screen. That is, another historical or legendary hero has been bled dry of any dignity or credibility [1].

And so, after thirty years since the New Age pop culture of Euro-America first appropriated the medieval Persian Sufi mystic and poet Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi (d. 1273) (better known to posterity as ‘Rumi’) — an appropriation, I might add, facilitated via a Rumi publishing industry spawned from the adaptations (and not proper translations) made by American beat poets Coleman Barks and Robert Bly — we are now to anticipate a forthcoming Hollywood biopic about his life on the big screen.

The rumoured casting for the film has Leonardo DiCaprio in the main role as Jalaluddin Rumi with “Iron Man” Robert Downey Jr.

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being hinted at the supporting role as Rumi’s spiritual preceptor, the Shams of Tabriz (d. 1248). David Fanzoni, of “Gladiator” (2000) fame, together with Stephen Joel Brown are the screenwriters and producers for the forthcoming Hollywood extravaganza; and ever since its announcement earlier in June, the future film has already created a storm of controversy, with accusations of whitewash abounding in the corporate media, blogosphere and social media alike. An online petition has even been made directly calling on Fanzoni and Brown to reconsider their choice of casting with over 14,000 signatures collected as of this writing that correctly characterizes this choice of casting “...as both ludicrous and offensive.” The petition further highlights the fact that “...Muslim actors are readily typecasted as terrorists, but when a movie portrays a Muslim in a positive light, they are shunted off to the side to make room for another white actor [2].”



Although perhaps a first for Hollywood, it should be mentioned here that this forthcoming Hollywood biopic by Fanzoni and Brown will not be the first instance of an on-screen adaptation on the life and times of this among the most widely known and universally cherished figures of Persian Sufism. Dozens of productions, too many to name here, have already been made in Turkey over the years; and Iranian producers Shahram Asadi and Arash Meyriyan’s acclaimed Persian

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language mini-series dramatization of Rumi's childhood entitled "Jalaluddin" -- a series that covers his early life all the way to the period of his family's flight from Balkh -- aired its final, eleventh episode in Iran only last year (2015) [3].

Rumi, Shams and History

Mawlana (our master; Turkish 'Mevlana') Jalaluddin (the majesty of the religion) Muhammad ibn Muhammad Baha'uddin al-Walad al-Balkhi was born in Balkh (located in modern north-east Afghanistan) -- others contend his birthplace was actually in Wakhsh in modern south-eastern Tajikistan -- during the early thirteenth century to a notable religious family whose father traced his lineage back to the family of the first Sunni caliph Abu Bakr (d. 632) [4].

Rumi's father Sultan al-Ulama Baha'uddin Walad (d. 1231) -- who was arguably his first teacher on the spiritual path -- was already an accomplished Sufi as well as a renowned exoteric religious scholar in his own right. Political rivalries with other scholars in the royal court of the kingdom of the Khwarizmshah -- together with the Mongol onslaught that would soon engulf the whole of Central and most of South-West Asia (and beyond) in an orgy of blood and destruction -- forced Sultan Baha'uddin Walad to move his family out of Balkh, eventually settling in Seljuq Anatolia in the town of Konya. Here



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Sultan Baha'uddin Walad quickly established himself as one of Konya's chief religious dignitaries. After his death (only two years after arrival) this function would pass over to his son Jalaluddin, now an adult.

In the years following Sultan Baha'uddin Walad's passing, while functioning in Konya as his father's successor in the exoteric religious sciences, Rumi found a spiritual master in his father's disciple Burhanuddin Muhaqiq Termezi (d. 1245). After Termezi's death, Rumi now also inherited the mantle of a Sufi spiritual master in his own right as well, already occupying this position on the eve of his first encounter with the Shams of Tabriz not too long after Termezi's death. According to the official hagiography of the Mevlevi Sufi Order, Shamsuddin Aflaki's 'The Station of the Gnostics' (*manaqib al-arifin*), the first momentous meeting with the Sun of Tabriz occurred while Rumi was mounted on his steed riding through the city market, when the dishevelled wild man or *qalandar* approached him, grabbed his stirrups and haughtily asked, "So who was greater, the Sufi Bayazid Bistami who said 'Glory be to Me, how great is my Majesty', or the Prophet Muhammad who said 'Glory be to God'"?

This meeting with Shams (and the enigma posed by him) was to trigger a profound spiritual crisis in Rumi and thereby set him on the path to the realization of the depths of the mysteries of divine love,



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with Shams acting as his preceptor and spiritual mirror (but not master): a meeting which would eventually witness Rumi explode like a volcano into some of the most profoundly exquisite verses of mystical poetry ever composed in world literature.

During the next three to four years, Rumi and Shams were inseparable, with Rumi apparently neglecting all of his official duties in Konya in order to be with his beloved Shams. Soon the envy, jealousy and machinations of disciples and a few members of his family alike first forced Shams to briefly flee Rumi's company and out of Konya to Damascus. Rumi was despondent and so Shams soon returned; but not too long after his return, Shams disappeared once again, this time forever, believed to have been murdered by one of Rumi's own younger sons, Ala'uddin. Other stories relate that Shams escaped murder and eventually resettled in the east, probably somewhere in his native Azerbaijan. Shams' purported eastward flight from Konya subsequently generated all kinds of legends about the man's posthumous survival with a Sufi tomb in Multan, Pakistan bearing his name and persistently claimed to house his final remains by local folk belief. Other legends hold Shams of Tabriz to have been the surviving son of the last Isma'ili Shi'ite Imam who had escaped the Mongol destruction of the Nizari Isma'ili stronghold at Alamut in 1256 CE and subsequently went on to Konya to initiate Rumi into the



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mysteries of esoteric Shi'ism, then departing after having accomplished the task, albeit most contemporary Rumi scholars reject this entire hypothesis as completely fanciful.

The *Diwan* of the Shams of Tabriz — Rumi's collection of inspired verse on the mysteries of divine love where the Shams of Tabriz stands as Rumi's symbol for the theophanies of God beheld by Rumi within himself — was mostly composed in the period after Shams' final disappearance. In the following years, as Rumi aged, he would find another spiritual preceptor, and thus another mirror to the divine theophanies, this time in his own disciple Husamuddin Chelebi (d. 1284) who served as his muse for the composition of his versical *magnum opus*, the Masnavi (rhyming spiritual couplettes).

Chelebi eventually became Rumi's successor in the Mevlevi Sufi Order — in turn followed by Rumi's eldest son Sultan Walad (d. 1312) — a Turkish based Sufi Order existing to the present day with the descendents of Husamuddin Chelebi as its hereditary leaders. At his funeral in 1273 throngs flocked from all the assorted religious and ethnic communities of Konya to the final burial ceremony; and, as a testament to Rumi's liberality and religious universalism, each claimed Rumi to have been one of their own.

It should be mentioned here that rather than being a proper name,



‘Rumi’ is actually a *nisba* (a geographic attribution). As scholar and Rumi specialist Franklin D. Lewis succinctly explains, “...the Anatolian peninsula which had belonged to the Byzantines, or the eastern Roman empire, had only relatively recently been conquered by Muslims and even when it came to be controlled by Turkish Muslim rulers, it was still known to Arabs, Persians and Turks as the geographical area of Rum...” (i.e. ‘Rome’) [5].

Rumi Whitewashed, Rumi Gushwashed

That said, David Fanzoni and Stephen Joel Brown have claimed that their motivation for making the film would be to challenge the prevailing Islamophobia of our times. While in itself the sentiment is certainly laudable and worthy of praise, it is in the rumoured choice of casting where the accusations of whitewash do actually appear to be credible. Jalaluddin Rumi was a Turko-Iranian who was certainly not a blonde haired, blue-eyed Italo-German-American like Leonardo DiCaprio is. In fact, this sort of whitewash -- which recently reached the climax of banality in Ridley Scott’s 2014 “Exodus: Gods and Kings” and Alex Proyas’ 2016 “Gods of Egypt” -- begins to question the sincerity behind Fanzoni and Brown’s expressed intentions in that regard.



Why would a white Anglo-European man need to be cast in the role of Jalaluddin Rumi in order to instrumentalize the counter-narrative against such stereotypes? Is this not, then, whitewash whereby a thing is only deemed palatable (or, rather, *commercifiable*) to non-Muslim audiences in the West when it has a prominent white Anglo-European face attached to it? If so, how is this then not compounding key elements of the very stereotype attempting to be countered? Would it not add to the actual cultural authenticity of the project if instead Fanzoni and Brown were to cast actors in those roles who were in fact closer to Rumi's own ethnic pedigree? Given these factors, cultural appropriation is very much a serious question hanging over this whole project before it has even been made -- precisely what Sedona has been doing to Rumi for these past thirty plus years.



Now, beyond these apparent questions of whitewash, it is hoped that Fanzoni and Brown won't produce just another feel-good movie pandering to the Euro-American New Age crowd either. As any perusal of his works in the original Persian will prove, not to mention works of academic scholarship like those of Lewis or the late Annemarie Schimmel's [6], Rumi's was a complex personality with a multifaceted worldview yet one simultaneously rooted firmly within Islamic Tradition (capital 'T'). His was certainly not a world of



gushing, meaningless New Age platitudes — which is what Barkes and Bly have literally built their careers on with their beatnik (mis)*representation* of Rumi — but rather one of profoundly sophisticated depth: sophisticated depth that while located in the specific religious universe of Sunni Sufi Islam simultaneously transcends all sectarian and confessional boundaries.

Be that as it may, and contrary to what many New Age types believe, the real Rumi of history was by no means an antinomian libertine subscribing to some kind of ‘*anything goes*’ spiritual doctrine. Rather, and as high as he ascended the ladder of spiritual insight and realization, the *shar’ia* of Islam together with its normative religious orthodoxy was very much the bedrock foundation of Rumi’s entire *weltanschauung* — and this is attested in Rumi’s poetry in the original as well as in his existing prose. Rumi rigorously prayed the *salat*, he fasted during Ramadan, he ate *halal*, he venerated the Prophet Muhammad and his family, and scrupulously observed all the other ritual minutia of orthodox Islam (as per the interpretations of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence to which he belonged), facts which would certainly raise the eyebrow of many a contemporary secular Western New Age admirer. Additionally, it should be noted that Rumi’s Masnavi, his lyrical *magnum opus*, is actually his mystical commentary on the Qur’an -- and according to the fifteenth



century Sufi Abdurrahman Jami, it is “the veritable Qur’an in Persian tongue.”

Yet it was precisely due to Rumi’s confessional particularism that as a practicing Sufi he was able to reach the summits of universal spiritual realization. In his collected lectures and correspondences posthumously entitled the *maqalat* (the Spiritual Discourses), the Shams of Tabriz himself emphasizes the importance of meticulous conformance (*motabe’at*) to every last element of the “path of Muhammad” (i.e. the *sunna*) as being precisely the sure way to such realization and unveiling [7]. Many of our contemporary Rumi lovers in the Coleman Barkes, Andrew Harvey and Robert Bly mould simply do not know what to make of such things. But no need to mention here that where Rumi and Sufism are concerned such conformance to normative Islamic orthodoxy is opposed to everything modern fundamentalism (or Islamism) represents, and this is a quintessentially important point to the whole story that Fanzoni and Brown ought to be highlighting above all others if they are serious about countering Islamophobia. In short, if Rumi is to be portrayed on the silver screen, Fanzoni and Brown owe it to his legacy to portray his life as it was and not how Hollywood or Sedona imagines it to be. Perhaps David Fanzoni and Stephen Joel Brown would do well to take to heart the quotation provided above from Rumi’s



Masnavi, not to mention what Jalal Al-e Ahmad says.

Notes.

[1] *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, translated by R. Campbell with notes and annotations by Hamid Algar (Berkeley: 1984), 129.

[2] See <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/750/067/632/cast-a-middle-eastern-actor-as-rumi/> (accessed 2 July 2016).

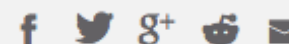
[3] See online at, <https://www.shiatv.net/plist.php?plist=5493> (accessed 16 June 2016). The producers have claimed that a subsequent series will be made which will cover Rumi's adolescence and adulthood; but no word as yet on the status of any current production or dates.



[4] The most authoritative, current academic monograph on Rumi remains Franklin D. Lewis' *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, Oxford, 2000; see also Lewis' *Rumi: Swallowing the Sun*, Oxford, 2013.

[5] Ibid., 9.

[6] See especially *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*, Albany, 1993.



[7] See (Trans. & Ed.) William C. Chittick and Annemarie Schimmel
Me and Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i-Tabrizi, Fons Vitae,
 2004.

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